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6. Schiller and Romanticism

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6. Schiller and Romanticism

Abstract
To define romanticism is to attempt something which the romantics themselves insist cannot be done. But we can try to identify and then describe it, first pointing out what it is not. One stable element in romanticism has been its consistent rejection of its opposite, classicism. While no great piece of art has ever existed which did not contain elements of both romanticism and classicism, the partisans of these two different points of view have insisted that different emphases made it great. Where classicism emphasised analysis, objectivity, harmony, wholeness, meaning, and discipline, romanticism stressed synthesis, subjectivity, disharmony, individuality, suggestiveness, and spontaneity. [excerpt]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Post-Enlightenment, Romanticism, Friedrich Schiller, aesthetic criticism

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Comments
This is a part of Section XII: The Post-Enlightenment Period. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:
From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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To define romanticism is to attempt something which the romantics themselves insist cannot be done. But we can try to identify and then describe it, first pointing out what it is not. One stable element in romanticism has been its consistent rejection of its opposite, classicism. While no great piece of art has ever existed which did not contain elements of both romanticism and classicism, the partisans of these two different points of view have insisted that different emphases made it great. Where classicism emphasized analysis, objectivity, harmony, wholeness, meaning, and discipline, romanticism stressed synthesis, subjectivity, disharmony, individuality, suggestiveness, and spontaneity. When the Enlightenment came to Germany these elements of classicism became dominant, and it

was against them that the romantics revolted.

Some romantics have suggested the elements which they believe to be important are not temporary but permanent aspects of man. They pick out the irrational, emotional, and affective factors, and point to their prevalence in the Greek and Christian parts of our Western Civilization. Since the seventeenth century's effective weakening of any supernatural or transcendental element in human thought, these interpretations suggest that the nonrational elements are permanent factors in nature, including human nature. But as the Enlightenment effectively destroyed the concept of permanent metaphysical elements, some other romantics turned to history and culture, insisting that the things which they considered important were permanent elements there.

Romanticism was not without its precursors, even in the seventeenth century itself. It was Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the great mathematician, who distinguished carefully between the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse, and insisted that "the heart has its reasons which the reason knows not of." Rousseau in the eighteenth century had also appealed to the emotion and feelings, while at the same time glorifying the natural man as the one who gives these factors free rein. In his Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences (1750) he reversed the Enlightenment train of thought and argued that the arts and sciences had not contributed to the progress of men's manners and morals. The fact that this essay won the prize in the University of Dijon that year was not without significance. And it was upon the thought of these men, especially Rousseau, that the romantics drew heavily.

The beginnings of romanticism are to be found in a general revolt, called the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) against the Enlightenment in Germany. It occurred during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, when the Weltanschauung of many individuals turned into a Weltschmerz (world weariness or sorrow). What produced this revolt was a disgust at the emptiness, formality, rationalism, and utilitarianism of contemporary life, a disgust not unlike that of the Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation of our own time. The Sturm und Drang, like the current reaction, was largely a negative and critical one seeking, when it did become positive, some form of self-expression which it believed was denied it by its culture. Likewise, Pietism with its emphasis on emotion also made a contribution to romanticism. And from Kant it drew heavily for its insistence on the worth and importance of the individual person.

Some form of this reaction was found both in England and France as well as Germany. In England the revolt, largely against industrialism and utilitarianism, refused to interpret man as some type of a calculating machine, even a moral calculator. This English movement turned to nature, in contrast to the industrial cities, and found a major expression in the
nature poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). In France the revolt was largely against the results of the Enlightenment, the militarism of Napoleon, and the philistinism of the newly arrived bourgeois class. While the earlier expression of French romanticism was largely conservative, later it gave vent to demands for social reform in behalf of the proletariat. In Germany romanticism focused against the cold formal rationalism of Enlightenment philosophy and its representatives among the ruling aristocracy. But, instead of concentrating on nature or society, the German romantics turned elsewhere, and achieved an almost unparalleled creativity in poetry, drama, music, criticism, novels, history, and philosophy. One writer has described this period as the time in which England conquered the sea, France the land, and Germany the air.

The unrest released by the romantic movement was not without its influence in Russia, Spain, Italy, and the United States. Out of this period came such great Russian writers as Aleksander Pushkin (1799-1837), Fedor Dostoevski (1821-1881), and Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). In the United States the work of such writers as James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Herman Melville (1817-1891), and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) clearly shows one or another aspect of romanticism. Indeed, so pervasive was the movement that the whole of the post-Enlightenment period has often been described as romantic. This is, however, as we have seen, only partly correct. But it cannot be denied that romanticism was a movement whose influence reached out into many geographical centers and areas of thought in Western Civilization.

Early romanticism was largely critical and negative in the interest of the individual person. When the later developments of the movement took shape, this individualism was retained as one of its characteristic emphases. The English poet, William Blake (1757-1827), made this point strongly by insisting that "to generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the great distinction of merit." This insistence on individual uniqueness was reflected in the romantics' continual reference to their "genius." When we try to determine what made up this romantic genius, we find that it was largely an insistence upon the prime importance of the promptings of one's heart, and the demand to give these promptings free rein. Sensibility was set over against sense, common or otherwise, and the "beautiful soul" became an object of admiration and striving.

But the romantic was not without his desire for some sort of spiritual roots. This demand gave romanticism its second major characteristic. The whole individual seemed to need a whole of which he could be a part. Later romantics, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), might be willing to try to shoulder the whole burden of complete and absolute freedom alone, but those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries generally made no such attempt. Rather they sought a homeland for their spirits in other places than the nature, or God, of Enlightenment thought. Some of them turned to the past, near or distant. The Middle Ages was one of their favorite haunts, while others sought their roots in the even earlier folk traditions and deities of their own race. Some, following this emphasis on tradition, found roots in their own nation, as the appearance of such terms as "fatherland" and "motherland" attest. Later, some members of the proletariat substituted class for nation, and developed a romantic attachment for that facet of society which they believed cut across all nations. This is why the romantics ran the whole political gamut from reaction to radicalism. Some turned to religion, identifying it with the feeling of harmony or dependence on the whole of nature. Some turned to distant lands and here, following the lead of Rousseau, discovered their home in an idealized conception of primitive man and his society, such as they believed existed in the South Seas. Still others reinterpreted nature as a creative organism, similar to a piece of art. And some turned to magic, giving their allegiance to the demonic powers as Faust did in the first part of Goethe's drama. And finally, some turned to heroes such as Caesar, Alexander, or Napoleon, finding in a worship of such figures the security which their restless spirits sought.

Wherever the romantic spirit laid hold the result was a new creation. Whatever it seized upon was reinterpreted or recreated, be it the past or the present, the near or the far. In artistic creations the romantic tried to unite the very diverse aspects which his individualism insisted upon. In them he tried to catch the whole to which his particular belonged. As Blake put it:

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour."

But the romantic spirit could never be satisfied. Like all organic things it had to grow; like all artistic endeavors it had to continue to try creating. It was never to cease. And, because of this there is a third aspect of romanticism which must also be noted: the continual striving, the endless search, and the enduring struggle. There was no resting place for the restless spirit of the romantic. Whenever the romantic did come to rest, as some did, losing himself in communion with nature or with God, then he ceased to be a romantic and became a sentimentalist or a mystic. Sentimentalism was apt to follow upon mysticism as the romantic savored his mystical experience of nature or of God. The true romantic, however, never lost the note of striving, of restlessness, of dissatisfaction.

Because romanticism insisted on individualism, wholeness, and striving, it was best expressed in the arts. For this
reason our selection is the work of a dramatist and poet. Ger­
man romanticism began in Berlin with a small group of critics
who led off with a concerted attack upon the formalism of con­
temporary literature. But the presence of three much more im­
portant men elsewhere soon led to the removal of its center to
Weimar and the nearby University of Jena. Here lived and
worked Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Schiller
(1759-1805), and the philosopher, Friedrich Schelling (1775-
1854).

Goethe was, and still is, the towering figure of German
literature. Poet and dramatist, he still found time for wide-
spread duties in connection with the administration of the
small state of Saxe-Weimar, as well as numerous scientific in­
vestigations. In many ways he epitomized the Renaissance ideal
of the universal man, to which Napoleon's remark, "Voila un
homme!" attested. His life spanned more than the romantic
movement, but his writings, while reflecting current movements,
maintained an Olympian distance which enabled him to produce
works which transcended his own time. It was through him that
Schelling came to the chair of philosophy, and Schiller to the
chair of history, at Jena.

Friedrich Schiller was the son of an army surgeon in Wutt-
temberg. The duke forced the boy to give up his desire to
study theology for law in the ducal military school. He even­
tually became, like his father, an army surgeon. He wrote
poetry and drama surreptitiously, some of which was produced.
He was ordered to stop writing, but chose rather to flee.
After several years of wandering Schiller came to Jena (1789).
Here, in close association with Schelling and Goethe, he gave
himself completely to the many studies which now interested
him. He was a serious student of Kant's works, but found that
the moral teachings of the philosopher of Königsberg did not
set well with his own romantic leanings. A close study of
Kant's aesthetics led him to something more congenial. Kant's
work in this field seemed to Schiller to be too subjective and
lacking in understanding of Beauty. For him Beauty alone
seemed to be able to unite a rigorous ethics and an appreci­
ative or sensitive aesthetics, to hold together moral worth and
artistic grace.

Schiller gave expression to these thoughts in a series of
letters written in 1793 to a German prince who had given him a
pension. These letters were the poet's way of expressing his
gratitude. A fire destroyed the originals, but copies had been
made and circulated among the prince's friends. Two years
later Schiller rewrote the letters and published them serially
in a magazine, The Graces, which he was then editing. To the
original letters he added some more. The events of the French
Revolution had changed his early enthusiasm for that movement
and the later letters stress humanity rather than the nation.
Our selection is taken from some of the original letters as
they were written and sent to the prince. They represent one
of the most permanent contributions of Germany in the field of aesthetic criticism, and they are one of the reasons why Germany was the leader of romanticism.

Sixth Letter

Have I perhaps overdone this description of the age? I do not anticipate that objection, but rather a different one: that I have proved too much by it. This picture, you will tell me, certainly resembles contemporary humanity, but it also resembles any people at all that is in process of civilization, since all without distinction must fall away from Nature through over-subtlety of intellect before they can return to her through Reason.

But if we pay any attention to the character of the age we must be astonished at the contrast we shall find between the present form of humanity and the bygone one, in particular the Greek. Our reputation for culture and refinement, which we justly stress in considering every mere state of Nature, will not serve our turn in regard to the Greek nature, which united all the attractions of art and all the dignity of wisdom, without, however, becoming the victim of them as does our own. The Greeks put us to shame not only by their simplicity, which is alien to our age: they are at the same time our rivals, often indeed our models, in those very excellences with which we are wont to console ourselves for the unnaturalness of our manners. Combining fullness of form with fullness of content, at once philosophic and creative, at the same time tender and energetic, we see them uniting the youthfulness of fantasy with the manliness of reason in a splendid humanity.

At that time, in that lovely awakening of the intellectual powers, the senses and the mind had still no strictly separate individualities, for no disension had yet constrained them to make hostile partition with each other and determine their boundaries. Poetry had not yet courted wit, and speculation had not prostituted itself by sophistry. Both of them could, if need arose, exchange their functions, because each in its own fashion honoured truth. However high Reason might soar, it always drew its subject matter lovingly after it, and however fine and sharp the divisions it made, it never mutilated. It certainly split up human nature, and scattered its magnified elements abroad among the glorious assembly of the gods, but not by tearing it in pieces, rather by combining it in varying ways; for the whole of humanity was never lacking in any single god. How completely different it is with us moderns! With us too the image of the race is scattered on an amplified scale among individuals -- but in a fragmentary way, not in different combinations, so that you have to go the rounds from individual to individual in order to gather the totality of the race. With us, one might almost be tempted to assert, the mental faculties shew themselves detached in operation
as psychology separates them in idea, and we see not merely individual persons but whole classes of human beings developing only a part of their capacities, while the rest of them, like a stunted plant, shew only a feeble vestige of their nature.

I do not fail to appreciate the advantages to which the present generation, considered as a unity and weighed in the scales of reason, may lay claim in the face of the best of antiquity, but it has to enter the contest in close order and let whole compete with whole. What individual modern will emerge to contend in single combat with the individual Athenian for the prize of humanity?

Whence comes this disadvantageous relation of individuals in spite of all the advantages of the race? Why was the individual Greek qualified to be the representative of his time, and why may the individual modern not dare to be so? Because it was all-uniting Nature that bestowed upon the former, and all-dividing intellect that bestowed upon the latter, their respective forms.

It was culture itself that inflicted this wound upon modern humanity. As soon as enlarged experience and more precise speculation made necessary a sharper division of the sciences on the one hand, and on the other, the more intricate machinery of States made necessary a more rigorous dissociation of ranks and occupations, the essential bond of human nature was torn apart, and a ruinous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance. The intuitive and the speculative understanding took up hostile attitudes upon their respective fields, whose boundaries they now began to guard with jealousy and distrust, and by confining our activity to a single sphere we have handed ourselves over to a master who is not infrequently inclined to end up by suppressing the rest of our capacities. While in one place a luxuriant imagination ravages the hard-earned fruits of the intellect, in another the spirit of abstraction stifles the fire at which the heart might have warmed itself and the fancy been enkindled.

This disorder, which Art and learning began in the inner man, was rendered complete and universal by the new spirit of government. It was not, indeed, to be expected that the simple organization of the first republics would outlive the ingenuousness of their early manners and conditions; but instead of rising to a higher animal life it degenerated to a common and clumsy mechanism. That zoophyte character of the Greek State, where every individual enjoyed an independent life and, when need arose, could become a whole in himself, now gave place to a collective mechanical life results. State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little
fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of imprinting humanity upon his nature he becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science. But even the meagre fragmentary association which still links the individual members to the whole, does not depend on forms which present themselves spontaneously (for how could such an artificial and clandestine piece of mechanism be entrusted to their freedom?), but is assigned to them with scrupulous exactness by a formula in which their free intelligence is restricted. The lifeless letter takes the place of the living understanding, and a practised memory is a surer guide than genius and feeling.

If the community makes function the measure of a man, when it respects in one of its citizens only memory, in another a tabulating intellect, in a third only mechanical skill; if, indifferent to character, it here lays stress upon knowledge alone, and there pardons the profoundest darkness of the intellect so long as it co-exists with a spirit of order and a law-abiding demeanour — if at the same time it requires these special aptitudes to be exercised with an intensity proportionate to the loss of extension which it permits in the individuals concerned — can we then wonder that the remaining aptitudes of the mind become neglected in order to bestow every attention upon the only one which brings in honour and profit? We know indeed that vigorous genius does not make the boundaries of its concern the boundaries of its activity; but mediocre talent consumes the whole meagre sum of its strength in the concern that falls to its lot, and it must be no ordinary head that has something left over for private pursuits without prejudice to its vocation. Moreover, it is seldom a good recommendation with the State when powers exceed commissions, or when the higher spiritual requirements of the man of genius furnish a rival to his office. So jealous is the State for the exclusive possession of its servants, that it will more easily bring itself (and who can blame it?) to share its man with a Cytherean than with a Uranian Venus!

And so gradually individual concrete life is extinguished, in order that the abstract life of the whole may prolong its sorry existence, and the State remains eternally alien to its citizens because nowhere does feeling discover it. Compelled to disburden itself of the diversity of its citizens by means of classification, and to receive humanity only at second hand, by representation, the governing section finally loses sight of it completely, confounding it with a mere patchwork of the intellect; and the governed cannot help receiving coldly the laws which are addressed so little towards themselves. Finally, weary of maintaining a bond which is so little alleviated for it by the State, positive society disinte-
grates (as has long since been the fate of the majority of European States) into a moral state of Nature, where open force is only one more party, hated and eluded by those who make it necessary, and respected only by those who can dispense with it.

With this twofold force pressing on it from within and without, could humanity really take any other course than the one it actually has taken? While the speculative spirit strove after imperishable possessions in the realm of ideas, it had to become a stranger in the material world, and relinquish matter for the sake of form. The business spirit, confined in a monotonous circle of objects, and inside these still further restricted by formulas, was forced to see the freedom of the whole snatched from under its eyes, and at the same time to become impoverished in its own sphere. As the former is tempted to fashion the actual according to the conceivable, and to exalt the subjective conditions of its imagination into laws constituting the existence of things, so the latter plunged to the opposite extreme of estimating all experience whatsoever by a particular fragment of experience, and trying to apply the rules of its own occupation indiscriminately to every occupation. One fell a victim to a vain subtlety, the other to a narrow pedantry, because the former stood too high to see the individual, and the latter too low to see the whole. But the deleterious effect of this tendency of mind was not restricted to knowledge and utterance alone; it extended not less to feeling and action. We know that the sensibility of the mind depends for its degree upon the liveliness, and for its extent upon the richness, of the imagination. But the predominance of the analytical faculty must necessarily deprive the fancy of its strength and its fire, and a restricted sphere of objects must diminish its wealth. Hence the abstract thinker very often has a cold heart, since he analyses the impressions which really affect the soul only as a whole; the man of business has very often a narrow heart, because his imagination, confined within the monotonous circle of his profession, cannot expand to unfamiliar modes of representation.

I have been concerned to reveal the pernicious tendency of our contemporary character and its source, not to shew the advantages by which Nature makes amends for it. I will gladly concede to you that, little as individuals could derive any profit from this dismemberment of their being, yet the race could have made progress in no other way. The phenomenon of Greek humanity was undoubtedly a maximum which could neither be maintained at that pitch nor be surpassed. Not maintained, because the intellect was inevitably bound to be compelled by the store which it already possessed to dissociate itself from sensation and contemplation, and to strive after clearness of knowledge; and also not surpassed, because only to a certain degree is clarity compatible with fullness and warmth.
This degree the Greeks had attained, and if they wanted to advance to a higher state of development they were, like ourselves, obliged to surrender the wholeness of their being and pursue truth along separate roads. There was no other way of developing the manifold capacities of Man than by placing them in opposition to each other. This antagonism of powers is the great instrument of culture, but it is only the instrument; for as long as it persists, we are only on the way towards culture. Only by individual powers in Man becoming isolated and arrogating to themselves an exclusive right of legislation, do they come into conflict with the truth of things and compel popular opinion, which ordinarily rests with indolent satisfaction upon outward appearance, to penetrate the depth of objects. While the pure intellect usurps authority in the world of sense, and the empirical intellect is engaged in subjecting it to the conditions of experience, both capacities develop to the utmost degree of maturity and exhaust the whole extent of their sphere. While in one the imagination dares, through its caprice, to dissolve the universal order, in the other it compels the reason to climb to the highest sources of knowledge, and to summon to aid the law of necessity against that order.

Partiality in the exercise of powers, it is true, inevitably leads the individual into error, but the race to truth. Only by concentrating the whole energy of our spirit in one single focus, and drawing together our whole being into one single power, do we attach wings, so to say, to this individual power and lead it artificially beyond the bounds which Nature seems to have imposed upon it. As surely as all human individuals, taken together, with the power of vision which Nature has granted them, would never succeed in observing a satellite of Jupiter which the telescope reveals to the astronomer, so beyond question is it that human reflection would never have achieved an analysis of the infinite or a critique of pure reason, unless Reason had become dismembered among the several relevant subjects, as it were wrenched itself loose from all matter and strengthened its gaze into the Absolute by the most intense abstraction. But will such a spirit, resolved, so to say, into pure intellect and pure contemplation, be capable of exchanging the rigid fetters of logic for the free gait of imagination, and of apprehending the individuality of things with just and pure intention? Nature here sets, even to the universal genius, a limit which it cannot pass, and truth will make martyrs so long as philosophy still holds it to be her principal business to provide against error.

Thus, however much may be gained for the world as a whole by this fragmentary cultivation of human powers, it is undeniable that the individuals whom it affects suffer under the curse of this universal aim. Athletic bodies are certainly developed by means of gymnastic exercises,
but only through the free and equable play of the limbs is beauty formed. In the same way the exertion of individual talents certainly produces extraordinary men, but only their even tempering makes full and happy men. And in what relation should we stand to past and future ages if the cultivation of human nature made such a sacrifice necessary? We should have been the bondslaves of humanity, we should have drugged for it for centuries on end, and branded upon our mutilated nature the shameful traces of this servitude -- in order that a later generation might devote itself in blissful indolence to the care of its moral health, and develop the free growth of its humanity!

But can Man really be destined to neglect himself for any end whatever? Should Nature be able, by her designs, to rob us of a completeness which Reason prescribes to us by hers? It must be false that the cultivation of individual powers necessitates the sacrifice of their totality; or however much the law of Nature did have that tendency, we must be at liberty to restore by means of a higher Art this wholeness in our nature which Art has destroyed.

Seventh Letter

Ought we perhaps to look for this action from the State? That is not possible; for the State, as it is now constituted, has brought about the evil, and the State as Reason conceives it in idea, instead of being able to establish this better humanity, must first be itself established by it. And so the foregoing enquiries have brought me back again to the point from which they drew me for a time. The present age, so far from exhibiting to us that form of humanity which we have recognized to be the necessary condition of the moral reform of the State, shews us rather the precise opposite. If, therefore, the principles I have laid down are correct, and experience confirms my description of the present time, we must continue to regard every attempt at reform as inopportune, and every hope based upon it as chimerical, until the division of the inner Man has been done away with, and his nature has developed with sufficient completeness to be itself the artificer, and to guarantee reality to the political creation of Reason.

Nature in her physical creation indicates to us the way we should pursue in moral creation. Not until the struggle of elementary powers in the lower organizations has been assuaged, does she rise to the noble formation of the physical Man. In the same way the strife of elements in the ethical Man, the conflict of blind impulses, must first be allayed, and the crude antagonism within him must have ceased, before we may dare to promote his diversity. On the other hand, the independence of his character must be assured, and subjection to alien despotic forms have given place to a decent freedom, before we can submit the multiplicity in him to the unity of the
ideal. Where primitive Man still misuses his caprice so
lawlessly, we can hardly disclose to him his freedom;
where civilized Man makes so little use of his freedom,
we cannot deprive him of his caprice. The gift of lib­
eral principles becomes a piece of treachery to the whole,
when it is associated with a still effervescing power and
reinforces an already overweening nature; the law of con­
formity becomes tyranny towards the individual when it is
combined with an already prevailing weakness and physical
limitation, and so extinguishes the last glimmering sparks
of spontaneity and individuality.

The character of the time must first, therefore, re­
cover from its deep degradation; in one place it must cast
off the blind force of Nature, and in another return to
her simplicity, truth and fullness — a task for more
than a single century. Meanwhile, I readily admit, many
attempts may succeed in detail, but no improvement in the
whole will thereby be achieved, and contradiction of be­
haviour will always demonstrate against unity of maxims.
In other quarters of the globe humanity may be respected
in the negro, while in Europe it is dishonoured in the
thinker. The old principles will remain, but they will
wear the dress of the century, and philosophy will lend
its name to an oppression which was formerly authorized
by the Church. Terrified of the freedom which always de­
clares its hostility to their first attempts, men will in
one place throw themselves into the arms of a comfor­
table servitude, and in another, driven to despair by a pedantic
tutelage, they will break out into the wild libertinism
of the natural State. Usurpation will plead the weakness
of human nature, insurrection its dignity, until at length
the great sovereign of all human affairs, blind Force,
steps in to decide the sham conflict of principles like a
common prize-fight.

Eighth Letter

Is philosophy then to retire, dejected and despairing,
from this field? While the dominion of forms is being
extended in every other direction, is this most important
of all goods to be at the mercy of formless chance? Is
the conflict of blind forces to continue for ever in the
political world, and is the social law never to triumph
over malignant self-interest?

By no means! Reason, it is true, will not attempt an
immediate struggle with this brutal power which resists
her weapons, and no more than the son of Saturn in the
Iliad will she descend to personal combat in the dismal
arena. But out of the midst of the combatants she selects
the worthiest, arrays him, as Zeus did his grandson, in
divine armour and decides the great issue through his vic­
torious strength.

Reason has accomplished all she can, in discovering
and expounding Law; it is the task of courageous will and
lively feeling to execute it. If Truth is to gain the
victory in the struggle with Force, she must first become
herself a force, and find some impulse to champion her in the realm of phenomena; for impulses are the only motive forces in the sensible world. That she has up till now displayed her conquering strength so little, is the fault not of the intellect which was incapable of unveiling it, but of the heart which remained closed to it, and the impulse which refused its aid.

Whence in fact arises this still universal sway of prejudice, and this darkness of thought in the face of all the light that philosophy and experience have shed? The age is enlightened, that is to say knowledge has been discovered and disseminated which would suffice at least to set right our practical principles. The spirit of free enquiry has scattered the erroneous conceptions which for a long time hindered the approach to truth, and is undermining the foundations upon which fanaticism and fraud have raised their throne. Reason has been purged from the illusions of the senses and from a deceitful sophistry, and philosophy itself, which first caused us to forsake Nature, is calling us loudly and urgently back to her bosom — why is it that we still remain barbarians?

There must be something present in the dispositions of men — since it does not lie in things — which obstructs the reception of truth, however brightly it may shine, and its acceptance, however actively it may convince. An ancient sage has felt this truth, and it lies concealed in the significant maxim: sapere aude.

Dare to be wise! Energy of spirit is needed to overcome the obstacles which indolence of nature as well as cowardice of heart oppose to our instruction. It is not without significance that the old myth makes the goddess of Wisdom emerge fully armed from the head of Jupiter; for her very first function is warlike. Even in her birth she has to maintain a hard struggle with the senses, which do not want to be dragged from their sweet repose. The greater part of humanity is too much harassed and fatigued by the struggle with want, to rally itself for a new and sterner struggle with error. Content if they themselves escape the hard labour of thought, men gladly resign to others the guardianship of their ideas, and if it happens that higher needs are stirred in them, they embrace with eager faith the formulas which State and priesthood hold in readiness for such an occasion. If these unhappy people earn our sympathy, we should be rightly contemptuous of those others whom a better lot has freed from the yoke of necessity, but their own choice continues to stoop beneath it. These men prefer the twilight of obscure conceptions, where feeling is livelier and fancy fashions comfortable images at its own pleasure, to the beams of truth which dispel the fond delusion of their dreams. On the very deceptions which the hostile light of knowledge should dissipate, they have based the whole structure of their happiness, and are they to purchase so dearly a truth which begins by depriving them of everything
they value? They would need to be already wise, in order to love wisdom: a truth which was already felt by the man who gave philosophy its name.

It is, therefore, not enough to say that all intellectual enlightenment deserves our respect only insofar as it reacts upon the character; to a certain extent it proceeds from the character, since the way to the head must lie through the heart. Training of the sensibility is then the more pressing need of our age, not merely because it will be a means of making the improved understanding effective for living, but for the very reason that it awakens this improvement.

Ninth Letter

But are we perhaps not arguing in a circle? Is theoretical culture to bring about practical culture, and yet the practical is to be the condition of the theoretical? All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of the character -- but how, under the influence of a barbarous constitution, can the character become ennobled? We should need, for this end, to seek out some instrument which the State does not afford us, and with it open up well-springs which will keep pure and clear throughout every political corruption.

I have now reached the point to which all the foregoing considerations have been directed. This instrument is the Fine Arts, and these well-springs are opened up in their immortal examples.

Art, like Science, is free from everything that is positive or established by human conventions, and both of them rejoice in an absolute immunity from human lawlessness. The political legislator can enclose their territory, but he cannot govern within it. He can proscribe the friend of truth, but Truth endures; he can humiliate the artist, but Art he cannot debase. Nothing, it is true, is more common than for both Science and Art to pay homage to the spirit of the age, and for creative taste to accept the law of critical taste. Where character is rigid and obdurate, we see Science keeping a strict watch over its frontiers, and Art moving in the heavy shackles of rules; where character is enervated and loose, Science will strive to please and Art to gratify. For whole centuries now philosophers and artists have shown themselves occupied in plunging Truth and Beauty in the depths of vulgar humanity; they themselves are submerged there, but Truth and Beauty struggle with their own indestructible vitality triumphantly to the surface.

No doubt the artist is the child of his time; but woe to him if he is also its disciple, or even its favourite. Let some beneficent deity snatch the infant betimes from his mother's breast, let it nourish him with the milk of a better age and suffer him to grow up to full maturity beneath the distant skies of Greece. Then when he has become a man, let him return to his century as an alien
figure; but not in order to gladden it by his appearance, rather, terrible like Agamemnon's son, to cleanse it. He will indeed take his subject matter from the present age, but his form he will borrow from a nobler time -- nay, from beyond all time, from the absolute unchangeable unity of his being. Here, from the pure aether of his daemonic nature, flows forth the well-spring of Beauty, untainted by the corruption of the generations and ages which wallow in the dark eddies below it. A freak of temper can degrade his matter, as it has dignified it; but the chaste form is removed from its vicissitudes. The Roman of the first century had long bowed the knee before his emperors, while the gods' statues still stood erect; the temples remained holy in men's eyes when the gods had long since become objects of ridicule, and the infamous crimes of a Nero and a Commodus were put to shame by the noble style of the building which lent concealment to them. Humanity has lost its dignity, but Art has rescued and preserved it in significant stone; Truth lives on in the midst of deception, and from the copy the original will once again be restored. As noble Art has survived noble nature, so too she marches ahead of it, fashioning and awakening by her inspiration. Before Truth sends her triumphant light into the depths of the heart, imagination catches its rays, and the peaks of humanity will be glowing when humid night still lingers in the valleys.

But how does the artist secure himself against the corruptions of his time, which everywhere encircle him? By disdaining its opinion. Let him look upwards to his own dignity and to Law, not downwards to fortune and to everyday needs. Free alike from the futile activity which would gladly set its mark upon the fleeting moment and from the impatient spirit of extravagance which applies the measure of the Absolute to the sorry productions of Time, let him resign the sphere of the actual to the intellect, whose home it is; but let him strive, through the union of the possible with the necessary, to produce the Ideal. Let him stamp it on illusion and truth, coin it in the play of his imagination and in the gravity of his actions, in every sensuous and spiritual form, and quietly launch it into infinite Time.

But not everyone with this ideal glowing in his soul has been endowed with creative tranquillity and the great patient temper to imprint it upon the silent stone or to pour it into the sober word and entrust it to the faithful hands of Time. Much too impetuous to proceed by such quiet means as this, the divine creative impulse often plunges immediately into the present and into the practical business of life, and attempts to transform the formless substance of the moral world. The unhappiness of his generation speaks urgently to the sensitive man, its degradation still more urgently; enthusiasm is kindled, and glowing desire strives impatiently for action in
vigorous souls. But has he also asked himself whether these disorders in the moral world offend his reason, or whether they do not rather grieve his self-love? If he does not yet know the answer, he will discover it in the eagerness with which he presses for definite and rapid results. The pure moral impulse is directed at the Absolute; time does not exist for it, and the future is its present, as soon as it necessarily develops out of the present. For a reason having no limits direction is also completion, and the road has been travelled when once it has been chosen.

Give then, I shall reply to the young friend of Truth and Beauty who wants to learn from me how he can satisfy the noble impulse in his breast in the face of all the opposition in his century -- give the world on which you are acting the direction towards the good, and the quiet rhythm of time will bring about its development. You have given it this direction, if by your teaching you elevate its thoughts to the necessary and the eternal, if by your actions or your creations you transform the necessary and eternal into the object of its impulses. The fabric of error and lawlessness will fall, it must fall; it has already fallen as soon as you are certain that it is leaning over; but it must lean in the inner, not merely in the outward man. In the modest stillness of your heart you must cherish victorious truth, display it from within yourself in Beauty, so that not merely thought may pay homage to it, but sense too may lay loving hold on its appearance. And lest by any chance you may receive the pattern you are to give it from actuality, do not dare to enter its doubtful society until you are assured of an ideal following in your heart. Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise. Without sharing their guilt, share with noble resignation their penalties, and bow with freedom beneath the yoke which they can as ill dispense with as they can bear it. By the steadfast courage with which you disdain their good fortune, you will prove to them that it is not your cowardice that submits to their sufferings. Think of them as they ought to be when you have to influence them, but think of them as they are when you are tempted to act on their behalf. Seek their approbation through their dignity, but impute their good fortune to their unworthiness; thus on the one hand, your own nobility will awaken theirs, and on the other, their unworthiness will not defeat your purpose. The gravity of your principles will scare them from you, but in play they will continue to tolerate them; their taste is purer than their heart, and it is here that you must lay hold of the timorous fugitive. In vain you will assail their maxims, in vain condemn their deeds; but you can try your fashioning hand upon their idleness, Drive away lawlessness, frivolity and coarseness from their pleasure, and you will imperceptibly banish them from their actions, and
finally from their dispositions. Wherever you find them, surround them with noble, great and ingenious forms, enclose them all round with the symbols of excellence, until actuality is overpowered by appearance and Nature by Art. *